University of Massachusetts Amherst

From the SelectedWorks of Krista M. Harper

Summer July, 2001

Environment as Master Narrative: Discourse and Identity in Environmental Conflicts (Special Issue Introduction)

Krista Harper, *University of Massachusetts - Amherst*

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/krista_harper/11/

INTRODUCTION: THE ENVIRONMENT AS MASTER NARRATIVE: DISCOURSE AND IDENTITY IN ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS

KRISTA M. HARPER
University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Although anthropologists have been interested in questions of nature and culture from the discipline's earliest days, contemporary cultural anthropology is witnessing an explosion of interest in the environment and environmental movements. Anthropologists working in the United States have observed rapid changes in cultural concepts of the environment and note that popular beliefs about the environment are closely linked to concepts of social order (Kempton et al. 1995). Anthropologists working in remote communities around the world have observed local groups deploying terms from the international environmentalist lexicon, such as biodiversity and sustainable development, to defend indigenous claims to land, intellectual property rights, and political representation (Brosius 1997; Zerner 1995; Escobar 1996).

The articles assembled here investigate the rise of the environment as a master narrative organizing political practices. Although recent philosophers proclaimed the death of the master narrative of enlightenment (Lyotard 1984), the environment has become a quintessentially global narrative. Throughout the world, people are imagining the environment as an object threatened by human action. Environmentalism proposes to organize and mobilize human action in order to protect the endangered environment (Milton 1995). Sociologist Klaus Eder (1996) posits that ecology has become a "masterframe," transforming the field of political debate.

In a recent overview of the anthropology of environmentalism Peter Brosius (1999) describes environment movements as a rich site for the study of local-global articulations and political agency. Much of the growing interdisciplinary literature on the role of environmental movements and non-governmental organizations highlights the environmentalism's potential to bring grassroots actors into a globalized civil society, forming transnational networks for public participation (Lipshutz 1996; Peet and Watts 1996). Other scholars warn us to pay close attention to novel forms of global governance fostered by international environmentalism that may occlude local public participation (Jamison 1996).

Anthropologists are now beginning to study the formation of local, regional, and transnational environmentalist identities (Tsing 1993, 1997). Environmentalist identities may draw from essentialized images of indigeneity (Brosius 1999). Alternatively, they may foster new geographical, ecological, or ethnic affinities, as Arturo Escobar (1997) describes in his work on grassroots environmental groups in coastal Colombia. The formation of environmentalist identities is not a simple enunciation of pre-existing "interests." Rather, it is a process through which people reorganize such disparate elements as toxicological studies, gender, ethnicity, perceptions of risk, and landscape aesthetics into "discourse coalitions" around the concept of the threatened environment (Hajer 1995).

The articles collected here reflect a cross-section of current anthropological research on discourses of the environment and environmentalism. The authors pay special attention to the cultural production of knowledge about environmental problems and the creation of environmentalist identities and coalitions through communicative processes. In some of the cases described here, the endangered environment provides an organizing narrative for building grassroots activist networks, forging coalitions across ethnic boundaries, and empowering public participation. In other cases, environmental discourses are deployed by scientific institutions, government bureaucracies, and corporate enterprises in ways that co-opt grassroots concerns and marginalize public participation in decision-making. The environment may act as a global master narrative, but it is used and reconfigured in particular political settings.

This issue begins with two articles examining the environment as a politically-charged site of knowledge production during and following the Cold War. Chris Timura's paper examines how discourses on environmental security have come to figure prominently in policy discussions in the United States and internationally since the early 1990s. Timura maps the multiple research communities, institutions, and actors producing "environmental se-

curity" as an object of knowledge. He criticizes well-known "environmental conflict" analyses that privilege resource scarcity while ignoring local histories and power relationships. Drawing from case studies of resource-related conflicts in Ghana, Mexico, and Brazil, Timura argues that ethnographic research potentially provides more nuanced interpretations of the relationships between land, resources, and communal violence.

Krista Harper's article focuses upon the stories and performances elicited by the tenth anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster as it was commemorated by environmentalists in Hungary in April 1996. The Chernobyl explosion drew into question the authority of scientific expertise at the twilight of the Cold War, a process Harper terms "the politicization of knowing." At the same time, the catastrophe brought state welfare bureaucracies into scrutiny, presenting a cascade of everyday life dilemmas that caused many parents and professionals to see themselves as citizens and environmentalists. The author refers to this transformation as the "politicization of caring." Drawing from sociologist Ulrich Beck's concept of "anthropological shock," the author analyzes how environmentalists connect private crises in daily life provoked by environmental risks with the development of a public identity as activists participating in a global environmental movement.

The articles in the second part of this issue concentrate more explicitly on environmental movements as loci for the cultural production of the "environment." Thaddeus Gulbrandsen and Dorothy Holland offer an ethnographic analysis of discourse and power as they describe a federal conservation project, the American Heritage Rivers Initiative, as it has taken shape on the New River in North Carolina and Virginia. The American Heritage Rivers project encouraged local activist groups to join forces with business partners for "sustainable development." In the process of seeking private partners and federal resources, local environmental groups are drawn into discourse of "ecological modernization," a neo-liberal environmentalism that is friendly to capitalist development. Gulbrandsen and Holland are concerned with public participation and processes of marginalization encountered by grassroots groups.

In the final article of this issue Melissa Checker focuses on a multi-ethnic coalition of environmental justice activists in Brooklyn, New York. Neighborhood activists organized along ethnic lines until the late 1980s, competing for such resources as housing and education. In the 1990s activists developed an awareness of urban environmental issues and began organizing for environmental justice across ethnic lines. Drawing from the environment as an inclusive, organizing narrative, they created an environmentalist identity that facilitated multi-ethnic cooperation.

The articles in this collection bring ethnographic observations to analyze how environmental discourses travel and are transformed as different groups mobilize the concept of the environment in specific political struggles. Kay Milton (1995) describes environmentalism as a "transcultural discourse," a sphere of communication traversing cultural boundaries. According to Milton, environmentalism has been a particularly potent globalizing discourse because the "particular understanding of the planet as 'one place' has fuelled the development of environmentalist discourse as a global phenomenon" (p. 171). Conceptualizing the threatened environment as a transcultural discourse allows us to track its travels through a global topology of grassroots activist groups, government bureaucracies, scientific networks, and international non-governmental organizations.

The notion of the environment as a transcultural discourse helps anthropologists to see how our fieldsites are embedded in the "imagined community" of global environmentalism (Anderson 1983). It also permits us to look at the ways environmental discourses are reconfigured as they work their way through different political cultures. As Anna Tsing (1997) cautions us, environmental issues and institutions may be global in scope, but they are translated by actors in specific locales according to the exigencies of their symbolic and political worlds. Such translations are always strategic and rarely direct glosses, and the translation process reconfigures the global environmental narrative itself. While the master narrative of the "endangered environment" leads one community in Brooklyn to multi-ethnic coalition-building for environmental justice, it obscures the role of political and economic inequalities in the case of the "environmental security" policy discussions. By tracking environmental narratives across locales, we as ethnographers may uncover how the environment is constructed through political processes and who benefits or suffers from these constructions.

NOTES

Acknowledgments The contributors would like to thank Alx V. Dark, who organized a session on the theme "Environment as Master Narrative" at the 1998 American Anthropological Association meetings in Philadelphia. The articles in this collection represent the fruit of the discussions initiated at that panel. We would also like to thank Phyllis Pease Chock for encouraging us to publish this collection of papers as a special issue.

REFERENCES CITED

Anderson, B. 1983. *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism.* London: Verso.

Beck, U. 1995. *Ecological enlightenment: Essays on the politics of the risk society.*
Trans. by Mark Ritter. Atlantic Highlands NJ: Humanities Press.

Brosius, J.P. 1997. Endangered forests, endangered people: Environmentalist representations of indigenous knowledge. *Human Ecology* 25(1): 47-69.

_____. 1999. Analyses and interventions: Anthropological engagements with environmentalism. *Current Anthropology* 40(3): 277-309.

Eder, K. 1996. The institutionalisation of the environmental movement: Ecological discourse and the second transformation of the public sphere. In *Risk, environment, modernity,* ed. S. Lash, B. Szerszynski, and B. Wynne. Thousand Oaks CA: Sage.

Escobar, A. 1996. Constructing nature: Elements for a poststructural political ecology. In *Liberation ecologies: Environment, development, social movements,* ed. R. Peet and M. Watts. New York: Routledge.

_____. 1997. Cultural politics and biological diversity: State, capital, and social movements in the Pacific Coast of Colombia. In *Between resistance and revolution: Culture and social protest,* ed. O. Starn and R. Fox. New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Hajer, M. 1995. *The politics of environmental discourse: Ecological modernisation and the policy process.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Jamison, A. 1996. The shaping of the global environmental agenda: The role of non-governmental organizations In *Risk, environment, modernity,* ed. S. Lash, B. Szerszynski, and B. Wynne. Thousand Oaks CA: Sage.

Kempton, W., J. Boster, and J. Hartley. 1995. *Environmental values in American culture.* Cambridge MA: MIT Press.

Lipshutz, R., with J. Mayer. 1996. *Global civil society and global environmental governance: The politics of nature from place to planet.* Albany NY: SUNY Press.

Lyotard, J.-F. 1984. *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Milton, K. 1995. *Environmentalism and cultural theory: Exploring the role of anthropology in environmental discourse.* New York: Routledge.

Peet, R. and M. Watts. 1996. Introduction. In *Liberation ecologies: Environment, development, social movements,* ed. R. Peet and M. Watts. New York: Routledge.

Tsing, A.L. 1993. *In the realm of the diamond queen.* Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.

_____. 1997. Transitions as translations. In *Transitions, environments, translations: Feminisms in international politics,* ed. J.W. Scott, C. Kaplan, and D. Keats. New York: Routledge.

Zerner, C. 1995. Telling stories about biodiversity. In *Valuing local knowledge: Indigenous people and intellectual property rights,* ed. Stephen Brush and Doreen Stabinsky. Washington DC: Island Press.

Copyright of Anthropological Quarterly is the property of George Washington Institute for Ethnographic Research and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.